

## **The Benefits of a Peer Facilitation Programme**

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### **Introduction**

The student peer support scheme has been running for all years that London Metropolitan University has been in existence, and previously to this in different forms at the heritage institutions. Currently, a central coordinator runs the programme throughout the university, attending to training and administration and liaising with departmental contacts. After a thematic review the peer support programme was relocated from the Students' Union to Student Services in April 2007, falling under the student development area ('Reach') of the Career Development and Employment Service (CDES).

### **How the programme currently runs**

At present the Peer Support Programme operates in a number of certificate-level modules within the following departments: Arts, Media & Design; the Business School; Humanities, Arts & Languages and Computing, Communications Technology and Mathematics. There are also plans to expand the programme into other academic departments in the next academic year and beyond.

The Peer Support Programme is a centrally coordinated programme that requires the different academic departments and academics involved to support the programme by assisting with recruitment, selection, training, monitoring and evaluation.

### **How it started**

Peer Support is derived from an American academic support programme called Supplemental Instruction (SI), which was developed at the University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC) in 1973 by Dr Deanna Martin. The development of this programme was in response to growing attrition rates at UMKC. It was discovered that students were more comfortable discussing their concerns about coursework in a group setting of peers supported by a student who had previously passed that course successfully.

The SI Model in the USA involves the following:

- Student facilitators are required to attend the first year lectures for the course in which they will be offering facilitation
- The student facilitators run a weekly session at a regular time and venue.
- The sessions take place after scheduled lecture times
- Sessions are run for a specific subject /module and is marketed to the students studying that subject/module.
- Attendance is voluntary (Spencer and Wallace, 1995).
- Students attending the sessions are from the same module thus making group work more feasible.

The SI model has been adapted to suit the UK context. Since tertiary institutions in the UK offer a wider range of additional learning than what the USA offers, in the form of seminars, tutorials, workshops and lab sessions, it was deemed more beneficial for trained facilitators to be present at these sessions and apply the facilitation skills which they have learnt in training. This differs from the USA approach which favours sessions run outside the scheduled lecture times. Furthermore, due to the modular nature of studies at tertiary institutions in the UK, student facilitators are not required to attend first-year lectures (as they are in the USA).

### **Aims of the London Met programme**

The Peer Support Programme at London Met was introduced to:

- target high-risk courses (not high-risk students i.e. it is non-remedial and of benefit to all) (Arendale, 1994);
- assist in reducing the attrition rate (Wallace, 2003);
- create independent learners who are able to access different learning opportunities.

The aims and principles of the Peer Support Programme can be stated as follows:

- Priority is to target core certificate-level modules and the first-year experience
- Modules must contain an element of small-group work
- Peer collaborative learning takes place
- Facilitation is provided by second- or third-year students (referred to as student facilitators in this paper) who have successfully completed the relevant modules.

Our student facilitators undergo a full day of training from the central programme to learn various skills, strategies and techniques to implement when they facilitate a small-group work session. *The training is a prerequisite to becoming a student facilitator.*

During the course of the year the student facilitators are also offered a number of ongoing training opportunities. This additional training is focused on building the skills base of the facilitators and covering topics such as presentation skills and general study skills.

The programme is only present in courses where there is support from the academic department and involvement from course leaders. Assigned contact people in these departments are expected to liaise closely with the central coordinator. Assistance from the academic staff includes, but is not limited to:

- Selecting which modules would most benefit from having the programme in place.
- Selecting suitable students to become facilitators.
- Supporting the student facilitators presence in the seminar, tutorial, workshop or lab session by being aware of what role the student facilitator plays in the session.
- Allowing the student facilitators at the first session to introduce themselves and explain their role in the session.
- Making sure that the student facilitators collect the student names and ID numbers of those benefiting from peer support, so that the Central Coordinator is able to produce statistical information on how the programme is functioning.
- Getting feedback from the student facilitator at the end of the session or at a pre-arranged time.

### **Benefits of Certificate-level students**

Students at certificate-level who attend the seminar, tutorial, workshop or lab sessions with a student facilitator benefit in a number of ways:

- Helps students adjust to higher education.
- Helps build confidence and self-esteem.
- They are able to discuss the lecture material almost immediately after the lecture to gain clarity on areas which they did not understand.
- Students gain confidence by discussing complex course material (Capstick & Fleming, 2001).
- The work is discussed with a student facilitator who has previously passed that course and is aware of the subject content and where difficulties may lie.
- The student facilitator's role is not to give the students the answer but rather to encourage the students to share their knowledge. The aim here is to create independent learners and for students to realise that they can discuss their work with fellow students who may have a better understanding of the subject content. The student facilitator guides the students on where to look for answers for instance directing students to refer to their class notes and textbooks. The student facilitator should also feedback to the academic what areas the students are struggling with.
- Students who may feel intimidated to approach a lecturer are able to discuss problem areas in a friendly and informal manner.
- Gives students an opportunity to practice the subject, to make mistakes, learn from peer groups, and build up confidence.
- Enables students to increase their levels of performance and achievement.

- Demonstrates the value of working in a collaborative way, rather than one of competing.
- Enables a clear view of course expectations.

### **Benefits for student facilitators**

Students at intermediate and honours level, who become student facilitators benefit greatly from their experiences. The student facilitators are:

- Paid for their hours worked and can expect to work 4 hours a week during teaching time (although this can vary according to the specific needs of the department and available resources)
- Required to attend a full day of training to become a student facilitator.
- Able to gain confidence especially in situations when teamwork is required to attain a goal
- Able to practice their subject and gain a deeper understanding of it.
- Able to become more involved in the learning processes
- Able to gain in personal confidence
- Awarded with certification at the end of the year.
- Given the opportunity to complete an Elective Module in Citizenship which comprises (1) Rights, Social Justice and Diversity (SC2C67C) & (2) Voluntary Action - Learning in Communities (SC3C05C). These modules look at how you can learn from being part of a group or community and how participation can contribute to community learning.

### **Career development benefits for student facilitators**

Graduate employers are seeking students who are able to demonstrate their transferability of skills from tertiary education into the workplace.

Being employed as a facilitator will provide the student with:

- Ongoing training to enhance employability skills such as presentation skills
- Valuable experience to enhance their CV

Student facilitators are able to demonstrate the following skills:

- Responsibility - they are required to meet deadlines as well as regularly complete an evaluation form for each session for which they are involved.
- Time management – facilitators need to structure their own studies and social life around their responsibilities, handing in timesheets timeously to ensure payment.
- Communication - need to be able to communicate and empathise with fellow students while at the same time being able to synthesise information that is gathered about the challenging areas of study and feed this information back to the academic involved.

- Leadership - being able to lead the group without becoming the focus of the group, maintaining a friendly, informal atmosphere while at the same time keeping the focus on course material.
- Facilitation - applying skills learnt at training to get students to interact with their peers and to share knowledge and different approaches to studying.

Testimonials from student facilitators confirm the benefits they have gained themselves, including the reinforcement of their own learning:

*“I developed good mentoring and leadership skills. It gave me a good opportunity to keep in touch with what I studied over the years.”*

*“It helped me a lot with my own projects.”*

*“I received and enjoyed all the training sessions and gained work experiences in job roles I didn't even know myself I was capable of performing.”*

*“Before I started I was not that comfortable speaking in front of people and was quite shy. Being trained to do just that and going to a presentation skills session helped me a lot in becoming more confident.”*

All of the above skills will show a future employer that the prospective job applicant has confidence, has developed groups dynamics and is capable of working within a team, motivated not only to support fellow students but motivated with regard to their own studies which indicates the student has academic pride. All of these qualities demonstrate a student who is taking responsibility for their career and their life.

## **Benefits for academics**

It is important to re-state that the role of the student facilitator is not to re-lecture or re-teach. The student facilitator is also not there to take the place of the lecturer. Instead the student facilitator merely guides and encourages the students to interact with one another, to ‘swop’ and share their understanding of the subject content and to feedback to the lecturer any specific problem areas being encountered by students.

The benefits for academics are:

- Supports their increased workload (Spencer and Wallace, 1995)
- Students are enabled to keep up with course material (*ibid.*)
- Trains students in basic group work (*ibid.*)
- Able to learn more about the learning styles of the students and the problems which they encounter.
- Able to use this feedback to make changes to the certificate level curriculum based upon the difficulties encountered by students (Wallace, Briefing Paper)

- Students are empowered to take responsibility for their learning and this can help enhance their learning experience.

The feedback from staff has been that “the power-gap that exists between staff members and students is avoided” by having student facilitators present and it is acknowledged that “even if the teaching is very good students do not get 100%; there is always room for improvement for students of all levels of ability” (Wallace, 2003).

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## Biographical note

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